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AUTHOR Morenberg, Max
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ABSTRACT

The case study described in this paper supports the premise that sentence combining exercises do more to improve student writing than simply producing longer sentences. Following a brief description of a longitudinal study that involved college freshmen in 15 weeks of sentence combining exercises, the paper focuses on the changing characteristics of the writing of one student over a three year period and analyzes writing samples that the student produced before the 15 week sentence combining practice, immediately after the practice, and two and one-half years later in a delayed posttest administered during the student's junior year. Improvements were noted in the delayed posttest in the following areas: mature syntax, controlled style, developed paragraphs, analytic organization, and supporting details. Also discussed are the student's comparative scores on both holistic and analytic rating scales. (AEA)

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Sentence Combining Over a Three-Year Period: A Case Study*

Max Morenberg
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio 45056

We know a great deal about the effects of sentence-combining instruction on the writing of groups of students from grade four through the freshman year in college and beyond. For one thing, sentence combining increases their syntactic maturity levels. In experiment after experiment, groups of students who practiced making little sentences into big sentences in textbook exercises learned how to do the same thing in their own writing. For another, sentence combining helps students improve their writing, according to most of the studies. O'Hare's (1973) seventh graders, for instance, not only wrote longer, more mature sentences, but they wrote better papers also. The same was true of the students in experiments by Combs (1976), Pedersen (1977), Schuster (1977), Waterfall (1978), and Swan (1978).

The results of our own study of college freshmen at Miami University were consistent with those of previous research (Morenberg, Daiker, Kerek: 1978). After fifteen weeks of sentence-combining practice, much of it with whole-discourse problems, the experimental group, composed of six classes--three taught by graduate assistants, three by faculty--wrote papers with more mature syntactic

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structures than an equivalent control group in a traditional composition course who studied a rhetoric handbook and read and discussed essays from an anthology. They also wrote sentences of more varied lengths. More important, though, the sentence-combining students wrote better papers than traditionally taught students--papers which experienced college teachers judged to have richer ideas, more supporting details, better (not only longer and more varied) sentences, improved diction and usage, and more individual voice. In a follow up study conducted two and one-half years after the original experiment, the gains made by the sentence-combining group proved durable and self-sustaining--indicating that the group gains evidenced natural, not artificial growth in writing ability (Daiker, Kerek, Morenberg: forthcoming). As juniors, the former sentence combiners continued to write syntactically mature sentences. And--according to ETS raters--continued to write substantial, qualitatively sound papers, also.

If we know a great deal about the effects of sentence combining on groups of students, we know little about its effects on individuals within the groups. This can be attributed, of course, to the nature of educational research. In testing a method of instruction, it is necessary to work with groups of students. The researcher deals in comparative statistics, numbers for the experimental group compared to numbers for the control. So sentence-combining studies, like others, report on group averages, group gains, group standard deviations, group abilities. But they generally say little about individuals within a group. The individual student, like Auden's Unknown Citizen, serves the "Greater Community" but otherwise is never heard from.

This lack of anecdotal information creates a peculiar situation. It allows readers of research studies to imagine that sentence-combining students become better writers by adding two words to each clause, writing every third T-unit with a participle, every fourth with an appositive, composing at least one T-unit in every paragraph with a nominative absolute--each posttest paper a hortus syntacticum of carefully nurtured cumulative sentences.

So I would like to change the method of reporting data this one time and focus not on group statistics but on the changing characteristics of the writing of one single student over a three-year period. By this means, I hope to show the sort of improvement that sentence-combining practice can effect and thereby to correct the misconception about what happens to students in sentence-combining programs.

The student I've chosen to follow is a young lady named Susan, a marketing major. She was in the sentence-combining class of one of the graduate assistants. As an incoming freshman in 1976, Susan was clearly not an average writer, though her syntactic maturity scores were relatively high. Her pretest paper on escaping from reality scored 2.5 out of a possible 6 on the Holistic rating, .70 less than the 3.20 group average. On the separate components of the Analytic Rating, also scored from 1 through 6, Susan did comparatively worse. She scored 1.5 in Ideas against the group's 3.22, 1.25 in Supporting Details against the group's, 3.22, 2.25 in Organization/Coherence against 3.09, 2.25 in Voice compared to 3.43, 2.75 in Sentence Structure compared to 3.21, and 2.0 in Diction/Usage compared to 2.93. On four of the six Analytic factors, Susan scored more than one standard deviation below her peers. In brief, the

overall, or holistic quality of her paper was well below that of her classmates, as were all six separate components of quality as measured by the Analytic Rating.

Susan's syntax fared somewhat better. Her 10.63 words per clause was almost two words longer than the group average of 8.75. Her 14.5 words per T-unit was a bit shorter than the group's 15.31; this was caused by the small clause per T-unit ratio of 1.36, in contrast to the group's 1.76. Susan scored 29.15 in T-unit variety; the group averaged 49.72.

In other words, when she entered college, Susan's papers were characterized by long clauses but weak, if not clumsy sentences with little variety in length. Overall, her first college paper gives a poor impression: it is vague, with few supporting details and little individuality, the kind of freshman paper Paul Roberts satirizes in "How to Say Nothing in 500 Words." The first paragraph from her pretest paper is typical of Susan's initial writing:

> Escaping from reality serves a part in everyones life. Everybody does it sometime or another and in many different ways. People make believe their lives to be different from what they are. Some imagine themselves as being the first person on Mars or becoming president of the United States. This getting away from it all and escaping to reality is necessary and can become a very beneficial and satisfying experience.

It is the dull, monotonous writing of someone who has little control over style, who has little concept of development, and who rushes from one generality to another--often repetitiously. It is the writing of a student groping for something to say in order to fill out the paper. Susan takes five sentences to say what one would have said better: "Because it is beneficial and satisfying, everybody escapes from reality at one time or another." The rest of

the paper displays the same characteristics. The second paragraph will suffice as example:

> Temporarily removing ourselves from reality is a necessary process for all healthy well-minded people. Everyone builds up tension. For example, school work, problems and daily activities lead to this build up of tension. In order to take-a-hold and control all these factors that build up we must escape. We must allow our minds to relax, to think of pleasant thoughts. In doing this, it relieves the mind of tension and creates energy for us to go back and tackle reality once again.

Each paragraph repeats the first. In effect, the paper could have been condensed to one thesis sentence and a second restricting or focusing the thesis:

> Because it is beneficial and satisfying, everybody escapes from reality at one time or another. Escaping from reality relieves everyday tensions, relaxes mind and body, and renews sources of energy.

No wonder the paper received a 1.5 in Ideas, a 1.25 in Supporting Details. It has Topic and Restriction but lacks Illustration. The long clauses don't embellish with details; they repeat and generalize. The syntax, though statistically "mature," limps along lifelessly.

Fifteen weeks later, Susan's writing had changed considerably, as her posttest scores indicate. Susan wrote better in every qualitative category. Overall, her writing improved almost to the average for her group. Her 3.75 Holistic score nearly achieves the sentence-combining group's 3.98; it equals the control's 3.72. In the separate analytic factors, Susan improved too, though not as much. In Ideas, she scored 3.0 compared to the group's 3.77, in Supporting Details 3.0 to 4.0, in Organization/Coherence 3.0 to 3.83, in Voice 3.25 against 3.91, in Sentence Structure 3.25 against 3.96, and in Diction/Usage 3.0 against 3.80. Statistically, her qualitative

improvements were impressive: up 1.25 in Holistic score, up in each of the analytic factors, 1 point or more in four of them.

Her syntactic figures changed also. Her posttest paper averaged 8.4 words per clause, down more than two words per clause from her pretest paper and more than one word per clause less than the sentence-combining group's average. Her T-unit length increased to 16.8 words, similar to the group's 16.05. But this was caused by the rather large--2.0--clause per T-unit ratio. Susan improved her T-unit variety score considerably. Though at 47.91, it was below the sentence combiners' 63.71 average.

In practical terms, how have all these changes affected Susan's writing? For one thing, Susan began to use details. Her posttest paper opens with an illustrative anecdote about a college student who, in order to be accepted by her peers, pretends to be an accomplished drinker:

> Tuesday night, a group of college students went uptown to celebrate the ending of first semester. Sally, a quiet girl who wanted desperately to fit in with the group and have this group of "popular people" like her, went along. Starting at the Purity and then to the Boarshead, the group of students kept drinking beer after beer. Wanting to be "one of them," Sally did the same, although she had never drank before. Soon afterwards, Sally began to feel ill, and went to the restroom and got sick. When she finally came out, about an hour or so later, she found her "newly-made" friends had gone.

For another, Susan began to control her style and to use free modifiers more frequently. She is no longer limited to monotonous, clumsy sentences. Some of her sentences even have a nice rhythm. In later paragraphs, we find:

> In some situations, we act one way, while in other situations we act another way.

She drank because they drank and she wanted to be like them. Not that sentence combining has cured all her sentence structure problems. Susan was still capable of writing weak, dull sentences on her posttest:

> By impressing people, we feel as if they will want to become our friends.

A time or two, she falters trying to handle a syntactic strategy emphasized in the sentence-combining class, in one place destroying the effect of balanced adverbial clauses by making them subjects of a sentence:

> When some of us drink more than we should, when some of us talk about our wealth, when some of us "name drop," and when some of us put on false "airs," are just a few examples of how we try to impress others.

Susan has not become an accomplished writer. But she has begun to understand the use of details to emphasize a thesis. She has become more conscious of the rhythms of her sentences; and she no longer repeats generalization after generalization. The paper has some originality, and it has structure and development based on enumeration.

Susan explains why people play roles and what effects role-playing has on others. She comes back to the opening illustration twice in her enumeration, a strategy which helps to unify the essay:

> A third reason for this behavior is because we want to be like others. Sally's drinking too much is a good illustration of this.
>
> Another way in which this role-playing can affect others is when it produces false impressions of ourselves. Using the illustration of Sally, we can see where some people might consider her a "partier" or heavy drinker, when actually we know that she never drank before.

Susan's delayed posttest--written in her junior year--continued to show improvement, with Susan becoming a better-than-average writer. Her 4.5 Holistic score was nearly .43 higher than the sentence-combining group's 4.07, .67 higher than the control's 3.90. In the Analytic Rating, she scored 3.5 in Ideas compared to the group's 3.85, 3.5 in Supporting Details to 3.92, 4.0 in Organization/Coherence to 3.79, 3.75 in Sentence Structure against 3.99, and 3.75 in Diction/Usage against 3.86. She wrote clauses averaging 11.22 words in length, T-units averaging 16.03 words, and had a clause per T-unit ratio of 1.43. Her T-unit variety score climbed to 60.03.

Susan's delayed posttest is characterized by mature syntax, controlled style, developed paragraphs, analytic organization, and supporting details. Here is the first paragraph:

> We all do it. We all play different roles in different situations. John can be the class clown in school, always joking around and be the refined, conservative, business type when interviewing for a job. Sally can be loud and bossy to her brother but quiet and whispery to her boyfriend. And Nancy can be crazily excited and shouting all about at a football game but later that night become proper and ladylike at the formal victory dance. We all are guilty of this change in our behavior at different times, but why? Is this playing of roles good or bad? What are the consequences we risk in assuming our variety of roles at different times?

It has balanced sentences and repetition for emphasis. Notice the repetition of "we all" in the first two sentences, the repetition of "can be" in the next three. Notice, too, that Susan organizes the paper with the last sentence:

> What are the consequences we risk in assuming our variety of roles at different times?

The paper continues by justifying role-playing:

> We act the way we do because it is expected of us.

And then it explains the possible consequences of role-playing:

> It can be misleading to others causing them to perceive us as something we are not, and this could have ill effects.

It still exhibits some of the awkward phrasing characteristic of Susan's freshman writing, as in a later paragraph:

> Referring to acceptance by society, if we act as properly conditioned, we are liked and accepted by others.

Clearly, the paper is no garden of syntactic delights--the sentences carefully trimmed into topiary art works. But neither is it untended and full of unsightly weeds.

If we can attribute the development of Susan's writing skills to the lessons she learned in her freshman English class--and I believe we can--then sentence combining served Susan well. It taught her to use syntax effectively, to develop topics with details, to organize logically, and to speak as an individual. It taught her what composition classes are supposed to teach students but seldom do. In brief, sentence combining taught Susan more about writing than how to compose bigger sentences.

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